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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

March 29, 1977

PARTICIPANTS: Rev. Monsignor Pio Laghi, Papal Nuncio, Argentina  
Patricia Derian, D/HA  
Fernando Rondon, ARA/ECA  
Robert S. Steven, POL, Amembassy Buenos Aires

PLACE: Papal Nunciatura, Buenos Aires

DISTRIBUTION: Ambassador Hill

In response to Ms. Derian's request for his views on the human rights situation in Argentina, Monsignor Laghi reviewed several background points which he said were important to a proper understanding of the present circumstances. First, he noted that the Argentine political structure had been functioning poorly long before the military coup of March 1976. The influence of Peron, in or out of office, had dominated and distorted the political scene for thirty years, and it was clear that the political institutions of the country were in a state of collapse. Second, he said that Argentina at the time of the coup had sunk "100 meters beneath the water" of corruption and social and political disarray. Most Argentines thought they were "only 50 meters beneath the water," but time had shown that the problem was much more serious than was realized and that more time was needed for recovery. The nation had "begun to float on the surface" now, but it was covered in the mud of corruption and disorganization and recovery had taken and would take longer than anticipated. Third, he said, there was guilt in the leaders of the country; they knew that they have committed evil in human rights matters and do not need to be told of their guilt by visitors. This would be "rubbing salt into the wounds."

In addition, the military had a real fear of the power of the terrorists at the time of the coup. They believed it possible that the guerrillas might be able to control two or three provinces, and that their strength was such that the life of the nation might be seriously disrupted by them. Individual military and police officers and men went in genuine fear of their lives. That fear at least partially explained the harshness and tactics adopted in combating subversion. Monsignor Laghi said that groups of rightists, not under the control of the higher officers of the government, were responsible for serious abuses.

The USG, he said, should be very careful in how it went about pressing its human rights case with the Argentine government. The great danger was that the position of the moderate elements in the government around Videla would be weakened and that other hardline generals would take power in their own coup. The human rights situation would then be even worse, he claimed. He counseled caution in how the US exercised its pressures upon the Videla government.

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He and the Argentine bishops had taken the same course of action in regard to the human rights situation. Some few of the 80 bishops were on the extreme right or left of the spectrum from complete support of the government's tactics in combating terrorism to sympathy with the opposition to the government. Most, however, remained moderate, and placed themselves above the political struggle. They and he had repeatedly and in very strong terms made private representations to the government, protesting human rights violations and demanding accounting for thousands of individual cases. In only a few cases had they received information from the government, however, and it had been pointed out to the government that the Church would have no alternative soon but to begin to speak out publicly. This time might come for the bishops after their conference in May. He himself had warned the President personally that he would be travelling to Rome to report to the Pope in late April or early May, and that the President must consider whether or not he wished to see the Nunciatura remain in the hands of a Chargé for an indefinite period of time.

The Nuncio expressed his conviction that Videla and other leaders are good men at heart. Videla was in his view a good Catholic, a man deeply aware of and concerned over the personal religious implications of his responsibilities. Videla had visited him in the Nunciatura within the week and such matters were discussed. Many of the military were men with grave problems of conscience which they brought to the military chaplains. The Nuncio was aware of their deep disturbance and felt some could become sick. At the same time, they believed that they were doing what was necessary.

When asked if he considered that the Church and Catholics were persecuted in Argentina, he showed surprise and quick denial. He said that individuals among the 5,500 priests and 11,000 nuns had been arrested or abused, but rejected the suggestion that the Church as such was under attack. At the moment there were 12 priests in detention, 7 of whom were non-Argentine. Several of them were detained up to two and one-half years ago, under the preceding government, and were under charges. Trials had even been started on some, but there had been delays such as changes of judges at the time of the coup, and the Church had been pressing for resolution of their cases. The Nuncio stated that about 7 of the total of 12 priests had admitted their involvement in or association with subversion. For example, two had been captured arms in hand leading an assault on a police station; another had hidden arms for the guerrillas. The Church hoped that in the cases of the foreigners at least it would be possible to secure their expulsion from Argentina after trial. But aside from these cases and isolated episodes such as those involving Father Rice and Father Weeks, it could not be said that the Church was subject to special persecution by the government.

The Nuncio also denied that Jews were subject to persecution, in response to a question from Ms. Derian. He kept in touch with Jewish leaders and believed that Jews were not singled out for persecution as Jews. He acknowledged that individual anti-semitic military or police officers might exhibit their bias when dealing with a subversive suspect who also happened to be Jewish, but felt that in the broader sense there was no anti-semitism in Argentina.

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He was unable to comment in other than very general terms when queried by Ms. Derian about the status of women in Argentina. He expressed his recognition of the less advanced position of women in societies such as Argentina, but clearly did not feel that there was meaningful legal or social discrimination against women.

As the visitors departed, the Nuncio thanked Ms. Derian for the visit and commented upon his close and highly satisfactory relationship with Ambassador Hill and the Embassy.

POL:RSSSteven:jf

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